STEWARDSHIP THEOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AS PATHWAYS FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Abstract
Africa and its diaspora communities face serious environmental challenges, including the loss of plant and animal species, climate change, and the destruction of natural habitats. This paper argues that two frameworks, biblical stewardship theology and Africa's own indigenous ecological knowledge, can together address these problems more effectively than either can alone. Drawing on Psalm 24:1, which declares that the earth belongs to God, and Genesis 2:15, which instructs humans to cultivate and keep the garden, this study explores how African diaspora communities can use these scriptures to motivate environmental responsibility. The paper also examines how African ancestral practices, including sacred groves, seasonal farming customs, and communal land management, have long protected biodiversity in ways that modern conservation science is only beginning to appreciate. Through the fusion of these frameworks, the paper shows that biblical theology and indigenous ecological wisdom are not opposites but partners in the pursuit of environmental justice. The study proposes a Covenantal Stewardship and Communal Ecology framework that integrates biblical theology, indigenous knowledge, and conservation science, and concludes that African diaspora communities occupy a unique position to bridge faith, culture, and conservation advocacy, offering lessons relevant both for Africa and for global efforts to protect the natural world.

Keywords: Stewardship theology; indigenous ecological knowledge; African diaspora; biodiversity conservation; climate justice; Psalm 24:1; Genesis 2:15

Introduction
The world faces a compounding ecological emergency in which climate change, biodiversity loss, and habitat destruction increasingly threaten the stability of natural

systems on which human life depends (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2021; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019). Africa is disproportionately vulnerable within this crisis. The continent hosts some of the richest biodiversity on earth, yet deforestation, desertification, illegal mining, and unsustainable agricultural expansion continue to erode ecosystems that millions of people depend upon for food, water, and livelihood (UNEP, 2024; Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2020; Kanu, 2024). At the same time, Africa contributes comparatively little to global greenhouse gas emissions, so that the burden of ecological crisis falls heavily on communities least responsible for causing it, raising urgent questions of environmental justice (African Development Bank Group, 2022).

Conservation policy has traditionally relied on technocratic and scientific approaches, including protected areas, wildlife legislation, and international treaties. These instruments remain necessary, but experience across the continent suggests that purely technocratic conservation, imposed without regard for local values, spirituality, and traditional ecological practice, often fails to secure lasting community commitment (Berkes, 2018; Kanu 2023). Conservation that ignores the cultural and religious meanings communities attach to land, forests, and rivers risks being perceived as external imposition rather than shared responsibility. This paper argues that two underused resources, biblical stewardship theology and African indigenous ecological knowledge, offer complementary foundations capable of grounding biodiversity conservation in values that communities already hold (Kanu, 2022).

Biblical stewardship theology, rooted in texts such as Genesis 2:15 and Psalm 24:1, presents creation as belonging to God and entrusted to human care rather than human exploitation (Bauckham, 2010). Indigenous ecological knowledge, expressed through sacred groves, seasonal farming customs, and communal land management, represents centuries of accumulated environmental wisdom developed long before contemporary conservation science emerged (Gadgil et al., 1993; Pilani, 2024; Kanu, 2017). Both traditions converge on a shared conviction that human beings are accountable for the wellbeing of the natural world rather than its unrestrained masters.

The African diaspora occupies a distinctive position from which to bring these frameworks into productive dialogue. Diaspora communities frequently retain both biblical faith and inherited ecological memory, while also engaging global environmental discourse from positions shaped by migration, displacement, and experiences of environmental injustice in host societies. This paper therefore examines how stewardship theology and indigenous ecological knowledge can be woven together into an integrated framework capable of informing biodiversity conservation efforts across Africa and its diaspora.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it examines the biblical theology of stewardship as it relates to creation care and biodiversity. Second, it explores African indigenous ecological knowledge systems and their historical contribution to conservation. Third, it develops a comparative and integrative framework, the Covenantal Stewardship and Communal Ecology model, that draws these traditions into constructive partnership for environmental justice. The argument advanced here does not claim that theology or indigenous knowledge can substitute for scientific conservation methods. Rather, it contends that durable conservation outcomes require moral motivation and cultural legitimacy that scientific expertise alone cannot supply, and that biblical stewardship theology and African indigenous ecological knowledge together offer precisely this kind of motivation. Where conservation policy has relied solely on legal restriction and external enforcement, compliance has often proven fragile once enforcement weakens. Where conservation has instead drawn on values that communities already hold sacred, whether biblical or ancestral, protection has tended to persist across generations without continuous external policing (Pretty & Smith, 2004). This observation forms the practical foundation for the argument that follows.

Literature Review

Biblical Creation Theology and Ecological Ethics

A growing body of scholarship has sought to recover the ecological dimensions of biblical theology, challenging earlier assumptions that Scripture concerns itself exclusively with human salvation (Bauckham, 2022; Horrell, 2022). Scholars increasingly demonstrate that the biblical narrative situates humanity within, rather than above, the wider community of creation, with texts such as Genesis 1 and 2, the Psalms, and the wisdom literature consistently portraying creation as possessing inherent value before God independent of its usefulness to humanity (Habel, 2020). This ecological turn in biblical scholarship provides the theological foundation for stewardship approaches to environmental ethics.

Stewardship Theology

Stewardship theology holds that human beings are entrusted with responsibility for creation rather than granted unconditional ownership of it. Berry (2022) traces the development of stewardship as a theological category, noting both its strengths in emphasising accountability and the criticisms it has attracted for potentially implying human superiority over nature. Some ecological theologians argue that stewardship language, if uncritically applied, can reproduce hierarchical assumptions about human dominion, and propose relational or priestly models that emphasise mutual belonging between humanity and creation instead (Moo, 2024). Beisner (2023) offers a more traditional defence of stewardship language, arguing that responsible dominion, properly understood, remains compatible with rigorous environmental care and need not be abandoned in favour of alternative models (Kanu et al., 2025. This paper adopts a

chastened stewardship model that retains the language's emphasis on accountability while foregrounding relationality and limits on exploitation, treating the debate between stewardship and relational models as a matter of emphasis rather than an irreconcilable disagreement.

Ecological Hermeneutics

Ecological hermeneutics provides the interpretive method through which biblical texts are read with explicit attention to their implications for the nonhuman creation. Horrell (2022) and Conradie (2020) argue that ecological hermeneutics need not impose modern environmental concerns onto ancient texts artificially, but can recover ecological dimensions already present within the theological imagination of Scripture. This approach guides the present study's reading of Genesis and the Psalms.

African Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

African indigenous knowledge systems have long incorporated sophisticated ecological practices, including sacred groves, totemic restrictions on hunting, seasonal farming calendars, and communal grazing regulation (Nabofa, 2022; Zalanga, 2023). These practices, though locally varied, share underlying principles of respect for nature, communal responsibility, and intergenerational stewardship. Scholars increasingly argue that these systems anticipated, in practical form, many principles that contemporary conservation science now treats as innovative, including rotational resource use and buffer zones around sensitive habitats (Zalanga, 2023). Kanu (2024) further argues that African eco-theology, understood broadly as the intersection of indigenous cosmology and lived religious practice, offers conceptual resources capable of enriching, rather than merely supplementing, global environmental ethics.

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice scholarship examines how the burdens of ecological degradation and the benefits of conservation are unevenly distributed across race, class, and geography. African and African diaspora communities frequently experience the effects of environmental racism, in which polluting industries, extractive projects, and inadequate environmental protections disproportionately affect marginalised populations (Villa-Vicencio, 2021). This literature provides an important corrective to conservation approaches that overlook questions of justice and equity, insisting that conservation strategy must attend not only to ecological outcomes but to who bears the costs of both degradation and protection.

Religion and Conservation

A growing interdisciplinary literature examines the role of religious communities in conservation practice, noting that faith institutions possess moral authority, extensive networks, and land holdings that position them as significant, if underused,

conservation actors (World Council of Churches, 2022). This study builds on that literature by proposing a framework that explicitly integrates biblical and indigenous resources rather than treating them as separate or competing conservation strategies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interdisciplinary design combining biblical-theological analysis, ecological hermeneutics, comparative theological analysis, and documentary research. The biblical-theological component examines Genesis 1:26 to 28, Genesis 2:15, and Psalm 24:1 within their literary and canonical contexts, attending to the Hebrew vocabulary of dominion, cultivation, and divine ownership. Ecological hermeneutics serves as the interpretive lens through which these texts are read for their environmental implications. The comparative theological component places biblical stewardship theology alongside African indigenous ecological knowledge systems, identifying points of convergence and divergence between the two traditions. Documentary research draws on scholarship in African indigenous knowledge, environmental theology, and conservation science, together with reports from international bodies including UNEP and the IPCC. Together these methods enable a framework that is textually grounded, culturally attentive, and practically oriented toward biodiversity conservation.

Biblical Theology of Stewardship

Genesis 1:26 to 28 has historically been interpreted as granting humanity dominion over creation, a reading that some critics argue has licensed environmental exploitation. Closer exegetical attention, however, suggests that the dominion language must be read alongside the image of God in which humanity is created, implying representative and caretaking authority rather than unrestrained domination (Wright, 2020). Dominion in the ancient Near Eastern context typically described the responsible rule of a steward acting on behalf of a sovereign, not the licence of an owner to exploit property at will. Genesis 2:15 provides an important corrective and clarification, describing humanity's vocation in the garden using two Hebrew verbs, *ābaḏ*, to work or serve, and *šāmar*, to keep or protect (Wenham, 1987). This pairing indicates that humanity's relationship to creation is one of cultivation combined with protection, a vocation of productive care rather than extraction (Middleton, 2014). Read together, Genesis 1 and 2 present a coherent picture in which human authority over creation is real but bounded, exercised always in service of creation's flourishing rather than its depletion.

Psalm 24:1 declares that the earth and its fullness belong to the Lord, along with the world and those who dwell in it. This affirmation of divine ownership relativises all human claims to land and resources. If the earth belongs to God, human beings hold it in trust rather than possess it outright, a theological principle with direct implications for biodiversity conservation, since species and habitats are not human property to dispose of but part of a creation whose ultimate owner remains God (Wright, 2004). The

Sabbath and Jubilee traditions extend this theology by institutionalising limits on exploitation. The Sabbath principle, applied to land in Leviticus 25, mandates periodic rest for fields, preventing continuous extraction and allowing ecological recovery. The Jubilee tradition further requires the periodic restoration of land to its original stewards, preventing permanent concentration of resources and reasserting that land ultimately belongs to God rather than to any human owner in perpetuity (Bergsma, 2007). These traditions together constitute a creation covenant of responsibility, in which blessing is tied to right relationship with the land and its inhabitants, and ecological degradation is understood as a violation of covenant obligation rather than a merely technical failure. This covenantal framing carries direct implications for biodiversity in particular, since a land permitted regular rest and periodic restoration is far more likely to sustain the plant and animal populations dependent on it than land subjected to continuous extraction. The Sabbath principle, in this sense, anticipates in theological form what conservation science now describes through concepts such as sustainable yield and ecosystem recovery time. Read together, dominion tempered by cultivation and protection, divine ownership relativising human claims, and periodic limits on exploitation constitute a coherent biblical theology in which biodiversity loss represents not merely an ecological failure but a breach of covenant responsibility toward both God and the created order.

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and African Conservation Traditions

Long before the emergence of formal conservation science, African communities developed sophisticated systems of ecological management rooted in religious and cultural practice. Sacred groves, forests or landscapes designated as spiritually significant and therefore protected from exploitation, remain among the most striking examples of this indigenous conservation ethic. Protected because they are believed to house ancestral spirits or serve as sites of ritual significance, sacred groves have preserved biodiversity, including rare plant and animal species, in areas otherwise subject to extensive deforestation (Nabofa, 2022). Their persistence demonstrates that religious conviction can function as an effective, low-cost, and community-enforced conservation mechanism.

Traditional biodiversity protection also operated through totemic systems, in which particular clans or communities observed restrictions on hunting or consuming specific animal species regarded as symbolically connected to their identity. These totemic restrictions functioned, whatever their spiritual rationale, as informal species protection measures that reduced pressure on vulnerable populations. Communal land ethics further reinforced conservation outcomes, since land in many African societies was held collectively rather than individually, with usage governed by customary authorities who balanced present need against future sustainability and intergenerational access. Indigenous agricultural practices likewise embedded ecological wisdom. Shifting cultivation, intercropping, and fallow periods allowed soil fertility to regenerate naturally, while seasonal ecological knowledge, transmitted orally across generations,

guided planting, harvesting, and resource use according to closely observed environmental rhythms. This body of practical knowledge often anticipated, in localised and experientially derived form, principles that contemporary ecology now formalises through concepts such as carrying capacity and rotational resource management (Zalanga, 2023).

Underlying these practices is a relational understanding of the human place within nature. Rather than positioning humanity as separate from or superior to the natural world, many African cosmologies understand human beings, ancestors, and the environment as bound together within a single moral and spiritual community, so that harming the land or its creatures carries consequences understood as simultaneously ecological, social, and spiritual (Kanu, 2024). This relational ontology differs in emphasis from stewardship theology's language of human responsibility for a creation from which humanity is theologically distinguished, a difference explored further in the comparative analysis below. Importantly, these indigenous systems were rarely static or purely traditional in the sense of being unchanging. Communities adjusted grazing rotations, farming calendars, and hunting restrictions in response to observed environmental change, demonstrating an adaptive management capacity that closely parallels what contemporary conservation science now terms adaptive co-management. The historical effectiveness of sacred groves and totemic protections in preserving biodiversity within otherwise heavily exploited landscapes provides empirical, not merely cultural, evidence that indigenous ecological knowledge merits serious engagement by conservation scientists and policymakers rather than dismissal as pre-scientific custom.

African Diaspora Ecological Identity

Migration has not erased the ecological memory that African diaspora communities carry with them. Even where physical connection to ancestral land has been severed by slavery, colonial displacement, or contemporary economic migration, cultural memory of rivers, forests, sacred sites, and communal land practices persists within diaspora religious and cultural life, often transmitted through story, ritual, and communal identity rather than direct experience of the land itself (Clifford, 1994). Diaspora churches have increasingly become sites where this inherited ecological consciousness intersects with biblical theology and contemporary environmental advocacy. Congregations that maintain transnational ties to African communities are often well positioned to translate ecological concern into concrete action, whether through remittances that support conservation initiatives, advocacy directed at institutions in host countries, or theological education that connects biblical stewardship with African ecological memory (Adogame, 2013).

Diaspora communities also frequently confront environmental racism within their host societies, including disproportionate exposure to pollution, inadequate green space, and

marginal siting of industrial hazards near minority neighbourhoods (Villa-Vicencio, 2021; Bullard, 2000). This experience of environmental injustice abroad often sharpens diaspora communities' sensitivity to environmental injustice in Africa, generating a transnational ecological consciousness attentive to the structural and racialised dimensions of environmental harm in both contexts. Such consciousness positions diaspora churches and organisations to advocate simultaneously for environmental justice at home and ecological restoration on the African continent, treating these as connected rather than separate concerns.

This dual positioning gives diaspora communities a distinctive comparative advantage. They are close enough to African ecological realities, through family ties, remittance networks, and periodic return visits, to understand local conservation needs with some specificity, while also possessing access to the institutional resources, advocacy platforms, and financial capacity of their host societies. Diaspora churches in particular are well placed to fund small-scale conservation projects, sponsor theological education that integrates ecological content, and advocate within host-country policy environments for climate finance and biodiversity funding directed toward African partners (Levitt, 2007).

Comparative Analysis

Biblical stewardship theology and African indigenous ecological ethics converge in several important respects. Both traditions articulate a fundamentally relational worldview, in which human beings exist in relationship with the divine, with community, and with the natural world rather than as isolated individuals confronting an inert environment (Magesa, 1997). Both traditions likewise emphasise communal rather than purely individual responsibility for ecological outcomes, understanding environmental harm as damage to a shared inheritance rather than merely private loss. Both traditions further express deep respect for creation as possessing value beyond its immediate utility to humanity, and both incorporate a strong sense of intergenerational justice, in which present generations hold the land in trust for those yet to come (Gyekye, 1997).

The two traditions also diverge in important ways that a genuine comparative analysis must not obscure. Stewardship theology, even in its chastened form, retains a language of human responsibility for a creation that stands, in some sense, distinct from humanity, reflecting the biblical narrative's account of humanity's unique creation in the divine image (Middleton, 2005). African indigenous ontologies, by contrast, frequently emphasise human embeddedness within nature more thoroughly, with less sharp differentiation between human and nonhuman participants in the moral community. This is a difference of emphasis rather than outright contradiction, and the two traditions can be read as complementary correctives to one another, stewardship theology

guarding against ontologies that might dissolve human moral accountability entirely, and indigenous relational ontology guarding against readings of stewardship that reintroduce human superiority over creation.

A further point of divergence concerns the source of ecological authority. Biblical stewardship theology grounds obligation in divine command mediated through scripture and, within diaspora contexts, through ecclesial teaching. Indigenous ecological knowledge grounds obligation in ancestral custom mediated through customary authority and oral tradition (Mbiti, 1969). These differing sources of legitimacy need not compete. In many African Christian communities, biblical and customary authority have long coexisted, with church leaders and traditional custodians occupying overlapping, sometimes contested, but rarely mutually exclusive positions of moral influence over land use (Kanu & Pilani, 2024). Recognising this coexistence, rather than forcing a choice between scriptural and customary authority, allows the comparative framework proposed in this paper to reflect lived religious practice rather than an artificially tidy theological synthesis.

Biodiversity Conservation and Practical Applications

Faith communities possess substantial, underused capacity to function as ecological actors. Churches often hold land, exercise moral authority within their communities, and maintain educational and social networks capable of mobilising conservation action at scale (Palmer & Finlay, 2003). Church-based environmental initiatives, including tree planting programmes, protection of water catchments on church land, and advocacy against illegal logging or mining, translate theological conviction into measurable ecological outcomes. Ecological education delivered through sermons, catechesis, and youth programmes can integrate stewardship theology and indigenous ecological knowledge into Christian formation, cultivating conservation values from an early age rather than treating environmental concern as a peripheral or optional commitment (Conradie, 2006).

Conservation partnerships between faith communities, indigenous knowledge holders, and conservation science organisations offer a particularly promising avenue for practical application, since such partnerships can combine biblical motivation, traditional ecological expertise, and scientific rigor in ways that no single actor could achieve alone (Berkes, 2018). Climate resilience programmes rooted in these partnerships, including community-managed reforestation and sustainable agriculture initiatives informed by both scriptural stewardship and indigenous seasonal knowledge, offer models for locally owned and therefore more durable conservation outcomes. Policy implications follow directly from this analysis, as governments and international conservation organisations should recognise faith communities and indigenous knowledge holders as legitimate and effective partners in biodiversity conservation

policy rather than treating conservation as the exclusive domain of technical experts and state institutions (IPBES, 2019).

Several practical mechanisms could operationalise this recognition. Formal co-management agreements could grant customary authorities and church landholders defined roles in monitoring and enforcement within protected areas adjoining their communities. Conservation financing instruments could channel funds directly to sacred grove custodians and church-based reforestation projects rather than exclusively to state agencies. Theological seminaries and environmental science faculties could develop joint curricula, training a generation of practitioners fluent in both scriptural stewardship and ecological science. Each of these mechanisms treats faith communities and indigenous knowledge holders not as passive beneficiaries of conservation programmes designed elsewhere, but as active co-authors of conservation strategy.

Toward an Integrated Ecological Theology

This paper proposes a Covenantal Stewardship and Communal Ecology framework as a model for integrating the resources examined above. This framework holds together four elements. Biblical theology contributes the language of covenant, divine ownership, and accountable stewardship, grounding conservation ethics in transcendent obligation rather than purely pragmatic calculation (Bauckham, 2010). Indigenous knowledge contributes centuries of practically tested ecological wisdom and a relational ontology that resists treating nature as inert resource (Mafongoya & Ajayi, 2017). Conservation science contributes empirical rigor, monitoring capacity, and technical tools for assessing ecological outcomes. Environmental justice contributes an essential corrective, ensuring that conservation efforts do not reproduce the inequities that have historically burdened marginalised communities with the costs of both environmental degradation and conservation enforcement (Schlosberg, 2007).

Integrated in this way, the framework treats biblical theology and indigenous ecological knowledge not as competing worldviews requiring a choice between them, but as complementary sources of moral motivation and practical wisdom capable of grounding conservation efforts that communities experience as their own rather than as external imposition. For African diaspora communities in particular, this integrated framework offers a theologically grounded and culturally resonant basis for ecological advocacy that speaks simultaneously to their biblical faith and their inherited ecological memory.

Applied practically, the Covenantal Stewardship and Communal Ecology framework suggests that conservation projects should be assessed not only by ecological indicators such as species counts or forest cover, but by the extent to which they engage the theological and cultural convictions of the communities responsible for sustaining them

over time (Ostrom, 1990). A reforestation project sponsored by a diaspora church, for instance, becomes more durable when framed explicitly as an act of covenant faithfulness to Genesis 2:15 and simultaneously connected to indigenous seasonal planting knowledge, rather than presented merely as a technical intervention detached from either tradition. This integrative approach does not require communities to abandon either their biblical faith or their ancestral ecological memory, but invites them to recognise the two as mutually reinforcing expressions of a single underlying commitment to the flourishing of creation.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that biblical stewardship theology and African indigenous ecological knowledge, though emerging from different sources, converge on a shared conviction that human beings bear responsibility for the flourishing of the natural world rather than licence for its unrestrained exploitation. Genesis 2:15 and Psalm 24:1 establish a theology of creation entrusted to humanity under divine ownership, while African sacred groves, totemic restrictions, and communal land ethics demonstrate that indigenous communities developed sophisticated and effective conservation practices long before the emergence of formal environmental science. The comparative analysis has shown that these traditions, while differing in emphasis, particularly regarding the degree of human distinctiveness from nature, are fundamentally complementary rather than opposed.

The African diaspora occupies a distinctive position from which to advance this integration, carrying both biblical faith and inherited ecological memory across borders while confronting environmental injustice in host societies that sharpens its ecological consciousness. The Covenantal Stewardship and Communal Ecology framework proposed in this study offers one model for translating this convergence into practical conservation partnerships involving faith communities, indigenous knowledge holders, conservation scientists, and policymakers. As Africa and the world confront accelerating biodiversity loss and climate change, such integrative approaches, grounded simultaneously in scripture, culture, and science, offer a more durable and locally owned foundation for environmental justice than any single framework could provide alone.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis developed in this study, the following recommendations are proposed. First, theological institutions and seminaries across Africa and its diaspora should incorporate stewardship theology and indigenous ecological knowledge into ministerial and lay formation, equipping church leaders to teach environmental responsibility as a core dimension of Christian discipleship rather than a peripheral concern.

Second, conservation organisations and policymakers should formally recognise faith communities and indigenous knowledge holders as legitimate partners in biodiversity policy, establishing structured mechanisms for their participation in conservation planning and implementation rather than treating conservation as an exclusively technical or state-led domain. Third, churches should develop concrete environmental initiatives on land under their stewardship, including reforestation, watershed protection, and sustainable land management, translating theological conviction into measurable ecological outcomes that communities can observe directly. Fourth, African diaspora organisations should establish transnational partnerships that channel resources, advocacy, and knowledge exchange toward biodiversity conservation in Africa, treating environmental justice at home and ecological restoration abroad as connected rather than separate commitments. Fifth, researchers should pursue further interdisciplinary study that documents and formally evaluates indigenous ecological practices, such as sacred grove management and seasonal farming systems, generating an evidence base capable of informing both conservation science and theological education. Sixth, conservation funding bodies should prioritise community-owned models that integrate religious and cultural motivation with scientific monitoring, since durable conservation outcomes depend on local commitment sustained over generations rather than externally imposed regulation alone.

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